



US College Application Essay Webinar 2021/2022

Common App Essay (and Supplemental Essays)



Kevin Heintz

M.A. English

Professional Editing Services



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Webinar Content



1) Writing a Strong College Admissions Essay

- Overview of the Personal Essay
- Tips for Writing/Dos and Don'ts
- General Application Essay Q&A

2) How to Write the Common App Essay 2021/2022

- Choosing a Common App Essay Prompt
- Outlining Your Essay
- Drafting Your Essay
- Revising Your Essay
- Common App Essay Samples

3) Editing a College Admissions Essay

4) Common App Essay Q&A

Writing a College Admissions Essay

What should a personal essay do?

What Is a Personal Essay in Writing?

At its heart, the personal essay is a piece of nonfiction writing that shares an interesting, thought-provoking, entertaining, and/or humorous story for readers that is drawn from the writer's personal experiences (even if it's second-hand information). Also called a narrative essay, the personal essay is different from the other essays, because it shares a story.

<https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-nonfiction/what-is-a-personal-essay-in-writing>

- College admissions essays are PERSONAL essays
- They should show the reader (i.e., admissions officers) your core values, personality traits, skills, and ambitions.
- Answer three questions: 1) Who are you? 2) Can you contribute something of value? 3) Can you write well?



Writing a College Admissions Essay



What are the essential elements of a personal essay?

- **A compelling hook.**
 - Grab the attention of the reader and keep them reading to the end.
 - Interesting opening line or paragraph, humorous or thought-provoking opening scene, pivotal moment or cliffhanger, etc.
 - Starting “in media res” can create some interesting tension.
- **An engaging story**
 - Give the story a clear beginning, middle, and end.
 - Make your narrative logical but concise (400 words or fewer in admissions essay)
 - Create emotion in the reader: joy, sadness, disgust, horror, etc.



Writing a College Admissions Essay



What are the essential elements of a personal essay?

- **Interesting characters**
 - YOU are the main character—add details that let the reader see you as a real person in the story.
 - adding 1-2 interesting characters to fill in your narrative can help.
- **Immersive setting**
 - Similar to characters: add lots of detail to give the reader a sense of place so they really feel “present” in your story.
 - Use concrete details: sights, smells, sounds, feelings, etc.



Writing a College Admissions Essay



What are the essential elements of a personal essay?

- **Meaningful point**
 - What is the “point” of the story?
 - Create a clear “moral” of the story showing the reader that you learned something, matured, overcame a difficult situation, etc. (depending on the prompt)
 - Center yourself in the point: showing that you truly acknowledge some important truth or change is as important as actually changing or making the right decision.



Admissions Essay Writing Tips



Essential Tips for Admissions Essays

What admissions officers look for: **self-motivation, introspection, hard work, perseverance, potential as a college student**

Emphasize everything from a **positive perspective** and write in an **active**, not a passive voice.

Show, don't tell. Demonstrate **by example**; don't say directly that you're a persistent person, **show it** through specific thoughts, actions, and words.

Link events, actions, and lessons with **continuity and focus**.



Admissions Essay Writing Dos and Don'ts

Essential Tips for Admissions Essays

DON'T use the personal statement essay to repeat your application docs.

- Don't repeat details heavily demonstrated in your resume.
- Find something else that reveals something new and that shows you put a lot of thought into your essay.
- Example: If you took a course in high school that conflicted with your religious views, write about that and how you reconciled the two.

DO use your own voice to tell your story.

- This is not an academic doc, so don't get caught up in being too technical or using awkward vocabulary.
- Keep your voice true to yourself but DO get help from a peer or editor to help enhance your expressions and flow.



Admissions Essay Writing Dos and Don'ts

Essential Tips for Admissions Essays

DON'T just write what you think the admissions officers want to hear.

- Similar to using your own voice, use your own STORY as well.
- Brainstorm which essay topics you'd like to write about, then choose the prompt to fit this topic.

DO make sure to address **ALL** of the prompt.

- Many students forget to answer all of the prompt's questions.
- This is more important for school-specific / supplemental essays.
- You don't need to use the exact same language in the prompt to address these issues.



Admissions Essay General Q&A



College Admissions Essay Q&A

Should I write different essays for each school I am applying to?

- Common App: Don't use the exact same essay word-for-word; but no need to write entirely different essays
- Supplemental: Write specific essays for each school.
- Change specific elements to match the culture and expectations of the specific school.

How do colleges evaluate my application?

- Most evaluate holistically: test scores, GPA, grade trends, strength of schedule, extracurriculars, volunteer work, [essays](#), [recommendation letters](#)
- Applicants are considered as “whole individuals,” so not ONLY grades and test scores are important.



Admissions Essay General Q&A



College Admissions Essay Q&A

Should I fill out the Common Application or Coalition Application?

- Both streamline the essay process.
- Common App is accepted at more schools; choose whichever your schools accept.

Should I apply early?

- Generally, applying early can increase your chances of acceptance.
- BUT there are some restrictions: *early decision, early action, and restricted early action.*
- Read the information on all your target schools' websites.



Admissions Essay General Q&A



College Admissions Essay Q&A

What should I write about for my college admissions essay?

- Write about something meaningful to YOU.
- The topic should reveal some significant information about your personality, passions, and general story:
 - Who are you?
 - What challenges have you overcome?
 - What do you want to do with your future?
 - How have you grown as a person?
 - What important lessons have you learned over the years?
 - How have you pursued your interests in your free time?

Writing the Common App Essay 2021/2022



- **Choosing a Common App Essay Prompt**
- **Outlining Your Common App Essay**
- **Common App Essay Samples**



Common App Essay Prompts

Common App Essay



“Which Common App prompt should I choose?”

“How do I respond to the essay prompts?”



Common App Essay Prompts

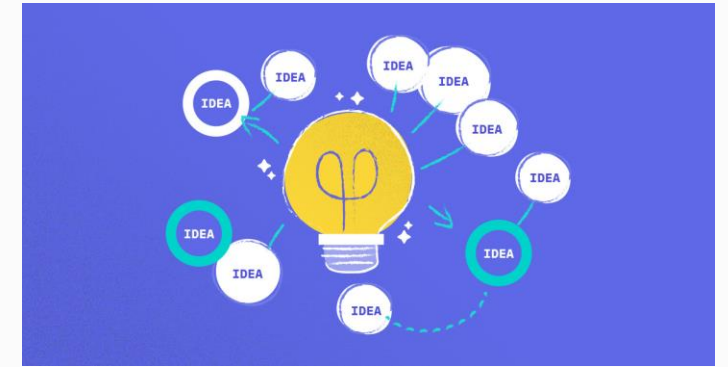


2021/2022 Common App Essay Prompts

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Preparing Your Common App Essay

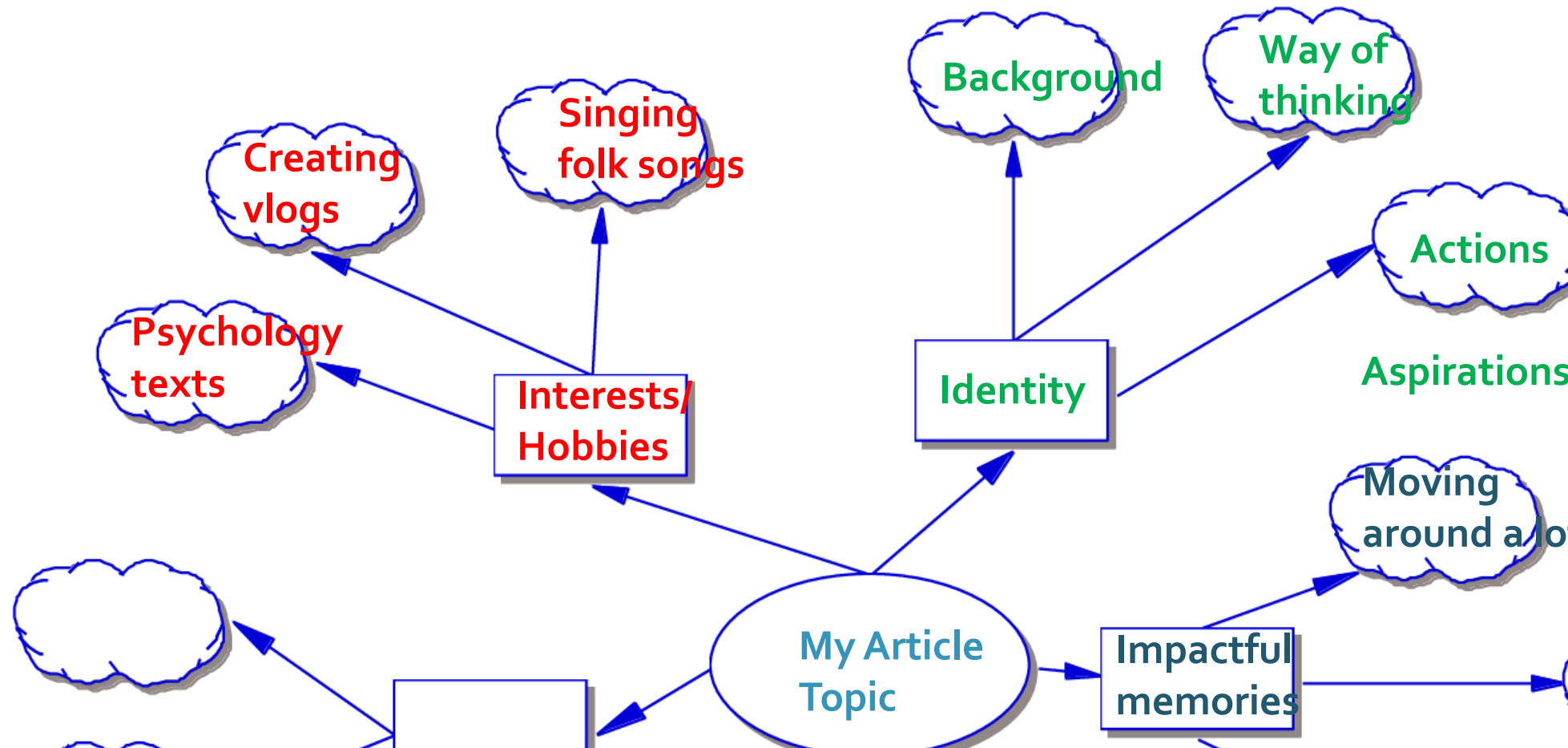
Step 1: Brainstorm Your Topic



- 1) Create a mind map of **interests, pastimes, passions, hobbies**, etc.
- 2) Write down a couple of **impactful memories or events** in your life and how they shaped who you are.
- 3) Break down your identity into **background, way of thinking, actions, and aspirations**.
- 4) Looks for **intersections between elements** to find a specific topic/narrative.

Preparing Your Common App Essay

1) Creating a mind map



Create a mind map of interests, pastimes, passions, hobbies, etc.



Preparing Your Common App Essay



Brainstorming your topic

Interests/ Hobbies

- Playing and singing folk songs on my guitar
- Creating educational vlogs on my YouTube channel
- Reading Victorian novels

Identity

Background/Experiences

- Moving around the country a lot
- Going to All-State choir

Way of thinking

- Introspection based on having few permanent friends
- Open-minded to meet more people

Current Actions

- Writing a “teenage memoir” of my experiences moving around the country

Aspirations

- To catalogue experiences of diverse people around the country.





Preparing Your Common App Essay



My Essay Topic

Extended topic

-My upbringing of constantly moving around the United States (due to my parents' jobs) led me to become more introspective and self-directed. My passion for writing folk songs and creating vlog content comes out of the need for deeper social interaction outside of school. It wasn't until we finally moved to and stayed put in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, that I was able to start using these artistic talents to prepare for a future as a writer. I feel my dedication to these creative endeavors makes me the perfect candidate for this renowned liberal arts college.

Short Topic / Title

-My background of social isolation and relocation was the catalyst for my introspective and artistic pursuits and now pushes me to write earnestly about the lives of other people.



Common App Essay Prompts



2021/2022 Common App Essay Prompts

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
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7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.



Outlining Your Common App Essay



Step 2: Outline Your Essay

1. Introduction. Attention grabber/hook. Foreshadow body main points. Thesis Statement.

2. Body Paragraph #1. Topic Sentence. Evidence/details.

3. Body Paragraph #2. Topic Sentence. Evidence/details.

4. Body Paragraph #3. Topic Sentence. Evidence/details.

5. Conclusion. Restate Thesis Statement. Rehash body



Outlining Your Common App Essay



Two Types of Communication Structure

In Narrative Structure, story events connect **chronologically**.

- Ex; Your story from beginning to end that shows how you encountered a difficulty and overcame this challenge, culminating in your success towards the end of your essay.
- Best for prompts #2, #3, #4, #5

In Montage Structure, story events connect **thematically**.

- Ex; Are there 5 thematically connected things that thread together different experiences/moments/events in your life? For example, are there 5 important classes you took? 5 teachers who impacted your educational path?
- Best for prompts #1, #6, #7



Outlining Your Common App Essay



Creating a Working Outline

1. Introduction (first 1-2 short paragraphs)

- Hook:
 - Powerful **anecdote** with concrete details
 - Can start “**in media res**” (in the middle of the action) or **from the beginning**
- **First-person** perspective
- Use some **dramatic language** to capture the reader’s attention.
- Give the reader enough **context** to understand what is happening and **where YOU fit in** to the story.
- Examples (Narrative & Montage)



Outlining Your Common App Essay



My Working Outline

1. Introduction (first 1-2 short paragraphs)

- Hook: Moving story from when I was a teenager
 - "Jacob!"

My mother shouted at me as I stared out the window of our red 1993 mini-van, rolling down the highway moving to yet another state. We had only been in Sacramento for four months and I was already on my way to a new middle school.

- End of first paragraph:
- *This constant cycle of new schools, new friends, new neighborhoods would become the catalyst for my introspective and artistic pursuits that came later...*



Outlining Your Common App Essay



Creating a Working Outline

2. Body Paragraphs (3-6 paragraphs)

- Topic sentences
 - Don't need to be as rigid as academic papers but should **use a logical structure**.
 - **First sentence** should give the reader an idea of what to expect in the rest of the paragraph.
- With narrative essays, the topic sentence can **move the essay to a different time and/or place**.



Outlining Your Common App Essay



Creating a Working Outline

2. Tips for Body Paragraphs

- Use **transition terms** and phrases at the beginning of each paragraph to move the story.
- **Vary your language** at the beginning of paragraphs.
- **Don't repeat events, actions, or other information** explicitly, unless it is part of a narrative strategy.
- **Use a LOT of details** to give your essay texture and put the reader in your shoes.



Outlining Your Common App Essay



My Working Outline

2. Body Paragraphs

P1: My first experiences moving around during elementary/middle school

P2: My emotional state and my first experiences with playing guitar and writing poetry in my room.

- Introduce my friend Mikey, my first writing partner

P3: The big move to Pittsburgh and how this experience got me interested in choir. “I could finally stay put and build a life.”

P4: Discuss my achievements throughout high school (literary, songwriting, extracurricular); and aspirations for next 3-4 years.



Outlining Your Common App Essay



Creating a Working Outline

3. Conclusion (1 long paragraph or 2 short para.)

- Summing up of your narrative
 - **Present successes** and **reflect on experiences**
 - Repeat/**summarize your “thesis”** (what you want the reader to think about you)
 - Leave a **“final thought”** to put an exclamation point on your essay.



Outlining Your Common App Essay



My Working Outline

3. Conclusion

- Repeat my main thesis:
 - *My background of social isolation and relocation was the catalyst for my introspective and artistic pursuits and now pushes me to write earnestly about the lives of other people.*
- Add final thought about how going to this college will help me achieve my artistic vision.
 - *The next step in building my own “Wonderwall” is at my feet—attending a college that allows me to foster my skills, where I can contribute the cumulative heft of my lonerism towards telling a grander story of universal experience.*



Drafting Your Common App Essay



Step 3: Draft Your Essay (Building on Your Working Outline)

- Continue to **fill out your working outline** with more details.
- **Edit and revise** within your outline as you proceed.
- **Remove outline elements** (Roman numerals, comments, notes, etc.) and format appropriately.
- **Use “successful essays” as a reference** to compare the shape and transitions of your essay.

Revising and Editing Admissions Essays



- **Reviewing & Revising Your Content**
- **Editing and Proofreading Essays**
- **Common App Essay Q&As**





Revising Your Common App Essay



Step 4: Review and Revise Your Essay

Checklist for Revising Your Essay

- “Revising” means improving the overall piece of writing (enhancing clarity, word choice, structure)

1) Does the essay clearly address the prompt?

- “Revising” means improving the overall piece of writing (enhancing clarity, word choice, structure)
- For example, look at prompt #2:

The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

- Make sure that your essay is directly related to the selected topic. It should be focused on a challenge or failure you have experienced and the lessons you learned as a result.



Revising Your Common App Essay



1) Does the essay clearly address the prompt?

- An essay addressing this prompt, for example, would not be fully on topic if it *only* described a challenge you experienced.
- You must also explain how this challenge affected you and what you learned from the experience.
- Key words from the prompt (in this case “**challenge**,” or “**setback**,” and “**lessons**”) should be mentioned in the essay.
- If your essay is off-topic or doesn’t address all parts of the question, you will need to do some revising.
- The first draft is where you’ll make major changes, such as changing the structure, shifting the focus on the story, rewriting entire paragraphs, or even scrapping the entire essay.



Revising Your Common App Essay



2) Is your essay well organized?

- The first paragraph of your essay should include some sort of **thesis or main idea** for the essay.
- The rest of the essay should be **organized around this thesis**, with all additional paragraphs developing and supporting the main idea.
- Each paragraph should also have its own **subtopic**, and all information within each paragraph should further **develop and support the subtopic**.

Did you use transitions to smoothly connect ideas?

- **Introduction** (Keep this short and sweet; don't get bogged down with the details.)
- **Conflict** (What happened? What's the problem?)
- **Solution** (What did you do to proactively solve the problem?)
- **Lessons learned** (What did you learn from pursuing a solution or experiencing this conflict? How have your values changed? How will you change moving forward?)



Revising Your Common App Essay



3) Did you use supporting details, examples, and anecdotes?

- Each paragraph should be **well-developed** with **specific details, examples, or anecdotes** supporting your point.
- Unlike other essays, the college admissions essay is intended to **demonstrate your voice, personality, and uniqueness**. It should be engaging and colorful.
- You should include **vivid, specific details** to bring your points to life.
- Find places to **add colorful examples and concrete details** to breathe some more life into your writing.



Revising Your Common App Essay



4) Did you show your voice and personality?

- Ensure that your essay is written in your **own unique voice**.
- **Don't include slang**, but make sure your writing doesn't sound stiff, forced, or unnatural.
- It should read almost as if you are talking to a teacher you feel comfortable with, or to a favorite older relative.
- When revising, **don't substitute too many high-level vocabulary words** to sound more intellectual.
- **Read the essay aloud** to see if it flows naturally and “sounds” like you.
- Does the essay accurately **portray who you are** beyond your test scores and extracurricular activities?




Revising Your Common App Essay




5) Did you stick to the topic?

- Check the essay for any information that is off-topic or unnecessary.
- Do you stay on topic, and do you extrapolate values as the essay progresses?
- Identify your thesis statement: **anything in the essay that does not support, develop, or relate to the thesis statement should be cut.**
- **Don't include unrelated information** to try and impress admissions officers.
- Anything that doesn't support, develop, or relate to each paragraph's topic sentence should also be cut or moved to another, more relevant paragraph.
 - Highlight your topic sentences.
 - Underline the set-up sentences that immediately follow your topic sentences.
 - Highlight your resolution.
 - Now, read your highlighted topic sentences. Ask yourself whether they are properly telling the story.



Editing Your Common App Essay



Step 5: Edit and Final Review of Your Essay

What to look for when editing:

- Basic errors: **spelling, punctuation, capitalization, word choice, formatting**
- Ensure you are following the word count (650 words or fewer). Your draft could be 800 or 900 words long, but you can cut this down here.
 - 1) **Cut down unnecessary elements** in the Introduction, then follow with other sections.
 - 2) **Cut down elements in the Conclusion**, especially repeated content or phrases.
 - 3) **Evaluate your phrasing**: repetitions, cliches, quotes, metaphors
 - 4) **Check advanced words** and see if they are appropriate and natural
- Check your **sentence and paragraph structure** for variability and length.
- Read your essay aloud



Common App Essay Tips



Formatting/style tips for the Common App Essay

- Start off with a **shorter first paragraph**—only 3 or 4 sentences.
- **Vary your sentence** and paragraph length.
- **Use the personal pronoun “I”** to keep the reader in your perspective
- Use lots of **concrete sensory details**.
- **Focus on the topic sentences** of each paragraph—make them stand out!



Common App Essay Q&A



Common Questions About the Common App Essay

- Should I just copy-paste the text from my MS Word doc into the Common App Essay text field?
- Should I pick a prompt about a “challenge or difficulty”?
- How many times should I revise my essay, and who should revise it?
- How early should I start writing the essay?
- Should I include info about my grades and test scores?



Common App/ Supplemental Essay Comparison

Common App Essay

650 words maximum

focus on showing
adcoms **who you are**

used at **most schools**
in the United States

**can be copied and
modified** for different
schools (somewhat)

Supplemental Essay

200-800 words
(depending on school
and # of prompts)

Focus on showing **who you
are** OR answering **targeted
questions**

applicable **ONLY** at **specific
schools**

should **ONLY** be **written
for that school**

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